

THE ROAD TO THE COUNCIL OF SERDICA (MAIN FACTORS FOR THE SEPARATION OF THE CHRISTIAN WORLD)

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This article is about the three main factors that caused the separation of the Christian world: 1. bishops and their desire for power¹; 2. emperors and their willingness to preserve control over religious matters²; 3. and heresies, to be more precise, the Arianism that take the position of “pretext” for the escalating conflict between Eastern and Western churches. This article does not treat the Council of Serdica itself, but the “road” to the Council that would always bring us to the temporal and geographical place of its happening – 343 AD at Serdica, the capital of diocese Illyria.

The Christian world as we know it today is composed of many big and small Christian communities united by their belief in the same God and divided by dogmatic, ritual or sometimes, local differences. For most of European citizens these differences illustrate the separation of Christian Europe into two main parts – Eastern – Orthodox³ and Western – Roman-Catholic⁴ and Protestant. Today “Catholic” and “Orthodox” are two antagonistic terms, which dominated Medieval and Modern European history. However, during Late Antiquity they were synonymous when distinction had to be made between “real” Christians and heretics⁵. During the fourth and the fifth centuries “catholic” and “orthodox” became the main characteristics for the Latin (West) and Greek (East) churches. The process of this transformation of church identification and the following separation of the Christian world reaches the point of irreversibility in 343 AD at the Council of Serdica.

¹ Henry Chadwick does not accept bishops’ desire for power as leading. According to him, their actions were the result of the anxious about the theological teaching of their tradition. Henry Chadwick, *The Church in Ancient Society: From Galilee to Gregory the Great*. (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 2001).

² Constantine and his sons had active policy towards Christianity. Despite this, none of them quitted emperor’s position as *pontifex maximus*. As *pontifex maximus* every Roman emperor was responsible for the religious life in the Empire.

³ Orthodoxy – right belief or purity of faith. The term does not occur in the Scripture. For more see *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. XI. (New York, 1911).

⁴ *Katholikos* – universal, occurs in the Greek classics – Aristotle and Polybius. For the first time is found in combination with Church (“the Catholic Church”) in St Ignatius’s letter to Smyrnaeans (written about 110 AD) – *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. III.

⁵ David Christie-Murray tries to define the term “heresy” in his work *A History of Heresy* (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 1–12.

This article does not treat the Council of Serdica itself, its history, the discussed dogmatic problems, or the canons issued by the bishops⁶. It is about the “road” to the Council of Serdica that would always bring us to the temporal and geographical place of its happening – 343 AD at Serdica, the capital of dioceses Illyria. This article is about the main factors that changed the history of the Christian Church in a way that our journey through the history of Christianity would always bring us to the exact same point and the exact same time to which Sozomenus refers saying⁷:

After the Synod, the Eastern and the Western churches ceased to maintain the intercourse which usually exists among people of the same faith and refrained from holding communion with each other. The Christians of the West separated themselves from all as far as Thrace; those of the East as far as Illyria.

We could determine three main factors, dominating the process of separation of the Christian world: 1. bishops and their desire for power⁸; 2. emperors and their willingness to preserve control over religious matters⁹; 3. and heresies, to be more precise, the Arianism that take the position of “pretext” for the escalating conflict between Eastern and Western churches¹⁰. Sometime in the beginning of the fifth century the barbarian tribes that converted to Arianism during the fourth century joined this group of factors and contributed for the conclusion of this process of separation¹¹.

Every process of separation is preceded by unity. Until fourth century Christians’ percept their world as united. According to Apostle Paul the church body is like the human body¹²: “For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ.” This concept about the church organization dominated the early Christianity¹³ and as we can see for the early Christians the Church was one. When emperor Constantine intervened into the Christian affaires he was the first who launched the

⁶J. Hefele-Leclereq H., *Histoires des conciles d'après les documents originaux*, vol. II. (Paris, 1907), pp. 759–823; H. Hass, *The Canons of the Council of Sardica AD 343; A Landmark in the Early Development of Canon Law*, (Oxford, 1958); G.R. von Hankiewicz, *Die Kanones von Serdika ZSSR*, 33 (1912), pp. 44–99; J.Mansi *Sacrorum Conciliorum nova et amplissima Collectio*, vol. III. (Florence, 1759).

⁷ Sozomenus, *Kirchengeschichte*, ed. Joseph Bidez and G.C. Hansen, GCS 50. (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1960), III 13.1.

⁸ See Footnote 1.

⁹ See Footnote 2

¹⁰ H. M. Gwatkin, *Studies of Arianism, Chiefly Referring to the Character and Chronology of the Reaction Which Followed the Council of Nicaea*. 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Deighton & Co. 1900); R. Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition*, revised edition. (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2002); *Arianism: Historical and Theological Reassessments*, ed. By Robert C. Gregg. (Philadelphia Patristic Foundation, 1985).

¹¹ Each factor has its own history and their paralleled and detailed study could add more information about the Church development in the first centuries and the social, economic and political responsibilities shared with the State. Such detailed study requires something bigger than article.

¹² *The Holy Bible*: King James Version. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1989), I Cor. 12:12–27.

¹³ Henry Chadwick, *The Church in Ancient Society*, pp. 65–67.

concept of the “divided church.” From his letters became clear that according to him the two parts of the Christian world were – “Orthodox/ Catholic” and heretical¹⁴. When we look into the writings of Early Fathers we would find one different viewpoint. “Heretics” were never accepted as part of the church, so when someone was excommunicated or condemned as “heretic” bishops did not unite the church, they only preserved the existing unity. The main point of this is that emperor Constantine was the one who brought into the light the terms “separation” and “unity”. Drake studies in details Constantine’s reasons to seek unity of the Christian church¹⁵. For our study although matters only the existence of this concept and the influence that it had over Christian leaders and governmental officials.

Everything started with Arius and his Trinitarian doctrine. Around 318/319 Alexander, the Bishop of Alexandria summoned bishops from Egypt, Libya and Thebaid to discuss the new doctrine preached by one of his presbyters¹⁶. Arius and his supporters were deposed and excommunicated but a peace settlement of the problem was not reached. Arius proceeded to Nicomedia searching for support and help¹⁷. His Lucianist friends Eusebius of Nicomedia and Eusebius of Caesarea became his main supporters and as leaders of Antiochian bishopric they organized a pro-Arian party¹⁸. If Arius had chosen to withdraw in exile with his supporters from the Alexandrian area this could lead to the natural end of Arian community, as happened with almost all heretic communities before. His escape, however, started one of the biggest theological controversies that changed not only Christian understanding of their own dogma but, most importantly, influenced the formation process of the church hierarchy.

At the beginning Arianism was a problem only for the churches of Alexandria and Antioch¹⁹. According to current historical and theological studies all councils and all discussions could be related to the different philosophical traditions of the Schools of Antioch and Alexandria²⁰. This restriction of dispute only between the two Schools and their previous conflicts is one of the main characteristics of the

¹⁴ Eusebius “*Life of Constantine*”, tr. by Averil Cameron and Stuart Hall. (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1999); Eusebius, *De Vita imp. Constantini*, PG, 20, II–IV.

¹⁵ Drake has a short study about Constantine and his concept about the unity of the Church. H. Drake, *Constantine and Consensus*, Church History, 64:1 (1995), pp. 1–15.

¹⁶ Epiphanius, *Pan.*, 69.3.3–7 – *The Panarion of Epiphanius of Salamis*, tr. by Frank Williams. Vol. 2, Books II and III (Sects 47–80, De Fide). (Leiden : Brill, 1994); Karl Holl, *Epiphanius III: Panarion haer. 65–80, De Fide*, rev. ed. Jürgen Dummer. (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1985); Sozomenus, *Kirchengeschichte*, I. 15. 4–6.

¹⁷ T. D. Barnes, *Athanasius and Constantius: Theology and Politics in the Constantinian Empire*. (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1993), pp. 202–203.

¹⁸ Epiphanius, *Pan.*, 69. 4. 1–5; Sozomenus, *Kirchengeschichte*, I. 15. 7.

¹⁹ We have no information that before Constantine’s invocation in 324 AD Arius and his teaching ever became subject of special councils summoned by churches outside bishoprics of Alexandria and Antioch.

²⁰ *Encyclopedia of Christian Theology*, vol. 1. (Routledge, 2004), pp. 18–20.

first period of Arian controversy. Between 318 and 325 the conflict remained enclosed into the philosophical discussions of the two Schools and influenced dogma and organization only in Antioch and Alexandria. Two local councils²¹ and a number of letters have been exchanged between Alexandria and Antioch but no settlement was reached. After his victory over Lycinius in 324 AD²² emperor Constantine interfered with the dogmatic dispute. Constantine's involvement into Christian conflicts was already part of his religious policy. About ten years earlier he tried to settle the Donatist schism in North Africa²³. Emperor's intervention was a result of bishops' request and Constantine helped with money, arranged for bishops to use imperial mail for their participation in the Council at Arles, summoned council of Arles and issued edicts in connection of Donatism²⁴. All his efforts to help ended with no settlement and the Donatist schism last almost a century and continued even after Constantine's death.

When Constantine's involvement is discussed we could find one major difference between Donatist and Arian schism. The initiative for his participation in Arian controversy was not bishops' but his. During his visit to Nicomedia Constantine found about the religious conflict between Alexandria and Antioch and immediately sent a messenger with letters to the leaders of the two hostile groups – Alexander and Arius and politely requested them to settle their problems²⁵. After their refusal to reconcile Constantine summoned a council of the whole Christian world, which took place at Nicaea in 325 AD.

The emperor's involvement transformed the problem with Arius and his followers from local to imperial. For the first time in Christian history a dogmatic problem was presented for discussion and Arius disposition before the bishop from the whole Christian world. This transformation of one local problem into a global and the translation of responsibility from the few upon everyone powerful enough to participate in decision-making process, even those with no interest to Arian controversy, could be defined as main cause for the separation of the existing "Orthodox/ Catholic" Christian world.

The Council of Nicaea changed only the balance of powers. Constantine found that the emperor's intervention into Christian affairs could be widened with few new tricks. To the methods he used during the Donatist schism – money

²¹ The first one was summoned by Alexander in Alexandria in 318/319 AD, and the second – by Eusebius of Nicomedia in Bythinia in 320.

²² Eusebius, VC, 2.23.2.20–21.

²³ W. H. C. Frend, *The Donatist Church: A Movement of Protest in Roman North Africa*, (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1952); *Donatist martyr stories: the Church in conflict in Roman North Africa*. Translated with notes and introduction by Maureen A. Tilley (Liverpool University Press, 1996); T. D. Barnes, *The Beginnings of Donatism*, JThS, NS 26 (1975), pp.13–22; W. H. C. Frend, *When did the Donatist Schism Begin?*, JThS, NS, 28 (1977), pp. 104–109.

²⁴ Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, PG. 20, 10.5.21–24

²⁵ Eusebius, VC, 2.23.2.20–42.

support for one of the parties and imperial mail, that guaranteed him the presentation of as many bishops as possible²⁶ he supplemented – emperor's personal presentation at the council, usage of imperial troops to reinforce imperial authority, and, of course, the threatening with secular punishments for those who disagree with the council decisions²⁷.

Constantine's politics towards Arians was marked by the lack of clear position about the heresy. Even after the Council of Nicaea summoned and headed by him, Constantine continued to change his attitude towards participants in the conflict after every new piece of information related with them. From extreme anti-Arian during the Council of Nicaea he turned into supporter of Arians shortly after that and remained one until his death. To explain Constantine's inconsistency into his article *Constantine and Consensus* Drake promotes the thesis that Constantine did not want the unity of the Christian world, but only peace and understanding between different religions within the Empire²⁸. Threats, excommunications and secular punishments for the bishops and clerics who refused to follow the emperor's decisions continued till his death.

Constantine's actions not only failed to settle the problem, but also triggered passions between two parties. Instead of learning from their previous experience with the secular authorities and the emperor, bishops continued to search for their help after every serious religious problem. Even more, bishops struggled for emperor's friendship as the only way for legitimating their dogmatic concepts as "Orthodox". Every Arian bishop who managed to become closer with Constantine obtains the right to call himself "orthodox".

During Constantine's reign the appeal to the emperor to settle church problems became a tradition. Few church councils were summoned with the intention to stop the indiscriminately transfer to church problems to secular officials²⁹. The more the bishops tried to use the emperor the more Constantine lost respect for canon laws. Seeing that council did not resolve church conflicts he began to do it by himself. First he exiled Athanasius to Gallia in 335 AD only for personal reasons without council and Episcopal conviction³⁰. Then Constantine summoned a council at Caesarea and before bishops' arrival he dissolved it³¹. He publicly violated and

²⁶ For the first time Constantine used the imperial mail in 314 for the council of Arles – Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, 10.5.21–24.

²⁷ Philostorgius *Historia Ecclesiastica*, PG, 65, 1.9 – 10; T. D. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*. (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1981), pp. 215–218; T. D. Barnes, *Athanasius and Constantius*, pp. 16–17.

²⁸ H. M. Drake, *Constantine and Consensus*, p. 3.

²⁹ Eusebius, *VC*, 4.27.2; T. D. Barnes, *Athanasius and Constantius*, p. 24. It is clear from 12th and 13th canons of Antioch. Two more like them were issued from the bishops, participating in the Council of Serdica (con. 8 and 9).

³⁰ Eusebius, *VC*, 4.27.3.

³¹ Athanasius *Historia Arianorum ad monachos*, PG, 161, 50.2; *Apologia. contra Arianos*, PG, 25, 29.3.

disrespected the canons and bishops' decisions of the Council of Tyr. These are only part of emperor's deeds that contradicted to church affairs. Even if Constantine really wished to unite the church his actions contributed to its separation.

Constantine's sons – Constantine II, Constantius II, and Constance continued the policy of emperor's intervention into religious affairs with all legal and illegal actions. They continued to implement Constantine's desire for unity of the Christian world but the results of their actions were even more destructive than their father's. They not only separated politically and geographically the Empire, but also managed to achieve religious polarization inside the Church. Their support or hostility to Arian party or to followers of the Nicaene Creed led to confrontation between Rome and Alexandria, from the one side and Constantinople and Antioch, from the other. Despite the Council of Nicaea until Constantine's death in the spring of 337 AD Arian struggle remained closed into Eastern churches. The active involvement of the new emperors and the Roman bishop widen the limits of Arian controversy and spread it around the whole Roman Empire.

A new powerful figure arose after Constantine's death – the Bishop of Rome. In 330 AD Constantine officially announced Constantinople as the new Christian capital of the imperial East and called it "the New Rome"³². The balance between main Christian religious centers – Rome, Alexandria and Antioch was disturbed. The victims were Rome and Alexandria. Rome was challenged with the possibility to lose its right to be called the bishopric see of the capital and all the privileges that followed, and Antioch – lost a big part of its territory. Until 338 AD the bishop of Rome had not active policy towards Arian controversy. His representatives participated in the Council of Nicaea and the bishop himself signed the council's protocols, but compare with his actions after 338 AD this was like policy of "active neutrality".

Why the bishop of Rome interfered actively in the Arian controversy shortly after Constantine's death? Did he felt unsecured for his authority after the establishment of Constantinople? Or the real reason was Julius's personal aspirations? No simple answer can be given to these questions. What we can affirm for sure is that the Bishop of Rome Julius fined the right moment for intervention in the Arian controversy and began successfully to manipulate emperors and bishops.

It was Alexandrians who first requested help from the Roman Bishop. This was the first time in Christian history when the Bishop of Rome intervened directly

³² The term became popular during the fifth century. We found him very popular among participants in fifth century ecumenical councils. Although this is term from the Council of Constantinople we could not say that it was commonly used during the fourth century because protocols of the Second ecumenical council are preserved in copies used in the Fourth ecumenical council. They were made for the last session of the Council when in discussion the Constantinopolitan canons had to be approved. That is why the terminology is typical for the first half of the fifth century.

into Alexandrian affaires. The “pretext” was Constantius’s decision to reinstate Athanasius as Bishop of Alexandria. His enemies organized city riot and a wrote letter to Rome with request for Bishop’s help. This was the first of series of simultaneous political actions of the Roman Bishop, leaders of the Arian party, and the emperors.

After Athanasius succeeded to achieve the Bishop of Rome as his supporter, Arian bishops took the lead. In 337/ 338 AD the new bishop of Constantinople – Eusebius of Nicomedia, summoned a council at Antioch³³. Arian bishops condemned Athanasius and selected a new bishop of Alexandria – Gregory who was consecrated by Eusebius himself³⁴. This was rough violation of canon laws forbidding consecration to be made by “all bishops in the province”³⁵. Constantius not only supported the illegal selection of Alexandrian bishop, but also secured the installation of Cappadocian in Alexandria. He sent him to his new see with a military escort that was required to remain in Alexandria and maintain order until the official ceremonies were completed³⁶. The emperor again urged his solution by using the authority of the secular power. However, this was not the first time when the canon law was roughly violated. Athanasius’s response was to seek for the help of the bishop of Rome. With this simple actions Constantius and Julius became opponents.

Shortly after the arrival of Athanasius’s letter Julius tried to summon ecumenical council, but Eastern bishops refused to participate. These simple actions of the Roman bishops presented his willingness for power/ authority equal to emperors. While Julius arranged the ecumenical council Constantius became sole emperor of the West part of the Empire. The good relations between him and Julius gave the latter opportunity to impose his ideas over the Eastern bishops. Another council was summed in 341 AD in Antioch with Eusebius bishop of Constantinople at the head. The council once again condemned Athanasius but the key moment of the meeting was the formulation of a new Creed, similar to the Nicaean. The main difference is in only one term – “consubstantial” but the consequences for the Christianity and for the Church could be crucial. The clarification of Arianism as “Orthodox” and not “heretical” would change the course of history³⁷.

Shortly after the Council of “Dedication” Eusebius died and the struggle for the Constantinopolitan see began. Paul, the exiled Bishop of Constantinople returned with request to be reinstalled as a bishop. While waiting for emperor’s pardon Paul reassumed his Episcopal duties. The Arians, however, supported a priest Macedonius as successor to Eusebius³⁸. The contradiction between the two parties

³³ Athanasius *Apol. c. Ar.*, 19.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 20.1.

³⁵ Fourth canon of the Council of Nicaea.

³⁶ Socrates, *HE*, II.11; Sozomenus, *HE*, III.6.

³⁷ J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*. (London: Longmans, Green, 1950), pp. 265–267.

³⁸ Socrates, *HE*, II.12; Sozomenus, *HE*, III.7.

broke into riots. After Hermogenes's (*magister equitum*) failure to overcome the riot Constantius retired to Constantinople. His first action was to banish Paul as main perpetrator of the riot. Although he reprimanded Macedonius and disapproves his chose for the bishop of Constantinople Constantius ordered the preparation of Macedonius installation on the throne. Once again a secular official was appointed to secure the process, this time the praetorian prefect Philip³⁹. The struggle for the Constantinopolitan see provoked Julius to intensify his actions.

When Julius at first had attempted to assemble ecumenical council in Rome the Eastern bishops simply refused to participate. Lacking a means of forcible coercion the Roman bishop had been unable to secure their attendance. The only one who had the power to exercise such coercion was the emperor. The Council of Serdica was held in 343 AD. Serdica was chosen probably because of its central location. Only one of the emperors was presented in the Council – Constance. Constantius was involved in a war with Persia and unable to participate. This deprives Easterners of emperor's moral support and for some researchers this was important for their withdrawing in Philippopolis – closer to Constantinople and the East. The Eastern bishops assembled by themselves and once again excommunicated Athanasius and Paul. The Western bishops deposed Gregory and key bishops of the East. They reaffirmed the Nicene Creed⁴⁰. After his victorious campaign in Persia Constantius devoted himself to resolve the consequences of Serdica. All his actions were in favor of Arians and against Athanasius, Julius and the emperor Constance.

The council of Serdica deepened the Arian schism and for the first time physically separated Eastern and Western bishops. Easterners refused to participate in the council with the excommunicated and condemned by them Athanasius, so, organized and summoned their own council in Philippopolis. So, the decisions from the council of Serdica have been recognized only from the Rome and its subordinate sees. The canons issued in the council however left their mark over the whole Church. Narrative sources show us that no matter that Eastern churches did not officially recognize the right of the Roman Bishop for final sentence he became *primus* among the bishops. Alexandria lost its first place and the new opponent pairs appeared – Constantinople against Rome and Alexandria against Constantinople. The constant interventions of emperors and barbarians accumulated extra tensions between Rome and Constantinople. However this political struggle for more power and authority finished with physical and spiritual separation of the territories and the laymen of these two sees. Around the 6th c. they started to define themselves with the two synonymous terms representing the Christianity – “Catholic” and “Orthodox”.

Arianism gave the bishops of the major roman cities an opportunity to concentrate in their hands more social, economic and political power. The three

³⁹ Socrates, *HE*, II. 16; Sozomenus, *HE*, III.9.

⁴⁰ Athanasius, *Hist.*, 16.

biggest cities – Alexandria and Antioch in the East and Rome in the West used the heretical conflict to strengthen their power and to weaken the positions of their “opponents”. For more than 50 years bishops from Alexandria and Antioch strived for the influence over the imperial court in Constantinople and for the right their dogmatic formulations to be recognized as righteousness. First emperor Constantine the Great interfered with the church problems, followed by his sons. When every emperor declared his religious position and achieved no success in convincing his opponents to accept it he started to use the army as main instrument for imposing his decisions and issued edicts favoring his party. The alliance between bishops and emperors only made situation worst. When the emperors failed to settle the problems the Eastern bishops turned to the bishop of Rome for his support. This was the crucial moment for the formation of the church hierarchy. At the beginning of fourth century the Christian world had three main leaders all with equal powers. From the narrative sources can be seen that there was no hierarchy between them. After the first Ecumenical council the bishop of Alexandria could definitely be positioned as first among the chosen four apostolic sees – before Rome, Antioch and Jerusalem. Only eighteen years later the bishop of Rome obtained the right to judge all the bishops in the Christian world and to pass on his sentences as final verdicts. He received this right in the Council of Serdica. However, these rights did not last long. The council of Serdica was summoned as ecumenical, but ended as local.

Since the reign of Constantine the Great the depending on the good will of the Emperors dioceses Illyria was tossed between the Episcopal sees of Roman and Constantinople. No interest in the common peoples life could be seen in the political actions and the fact that the two churches used different languages for the liturgy, had different ritual practices and even different understanding of the Holy Trinity were never influential into the emperors' edicts. For some years the parishes from these territories were forced to change their priests, their ritual habits, and to adjust with the change of languages – from Latin to Greek and from Greek to Latin. When the Bulgarian Kingdom was converted to Christianity in 864 AD Boris's interests were focused on the same territories. As we can see from the *Notities episcopatum* west from today's rivers Struma and Timok can be counted three times more Episcopal chairs than in the whole rest territory of Bulgaria. And because of the Slavic population the language was changed again. With the Ottoman invasion the situation changed again and continued to change with every significant political reversal. Current political and religious problems of the same region (today part of the Former Republic of Yugoslavia) show us that the lack of a firm religious and national identification could cause pain to more than one generation and even more than ten centuries.